



From Here



To There



And Back Again...



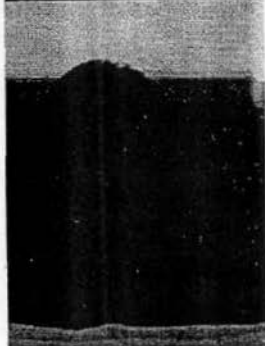
This zine started out about my four months in Amsterdam and became about my body. I'm not sure how that happened. I get stuck in so many places. So much of this feels new and it's the things that I don't have figured out yet that I want to share but they also take the longest. I started writting this zine over a year ago. At some point I needed to put this out in the world. There are pieces that feel undone but if I waited until I figured this all out it'd never happen. These pieces are connected through experiences of my body. I'm not sure how to underline the thread that unites them. I didn't expect to write so much about violence and trauma. I started writing and that's where I was left. That's one of the layers I keep coming up against.

I left out so many of the pieces I was going to put in here and consequently added a new one. One day I'd like to finish a zine about my time in Amsterdam. I'm not sure that will ever happen. I want to share so many of the things I learned there. It feels a little selfish to replace a zine about shared knowledge with a zine processing my own shit. I'm hoping this will still make sense to someone.

And I want to hear what you have to say but I'm sensitive so don't be cruel.

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Coming Out and Into You

I was in love, engulfed, and enamored. We'd been friend for years and one day after one of our long conversations driving to nowhere; I came home and all I could feel were butterflies. I started forming the words, telling my closest friends about these feelings I never saw coming.

We stayed in our holding pattern for months. One night before we ever spoke of crushes we found ourselves drunk and alone in my basement. Our friends were upstairs and there we sat holding each other. All this happened in near silence and I was held by the intimacy and mystery of it all. I've learned that mystery is not love. Mystery is my silence and silence is not what I need. My whole life I've been told I talk too much; a loud girl, too smart for her own good. If they only knew, could only understand my silence and shame, the words never spoken. I would rather do anything than talk about my body. I'm a sex health educator and I can talk for hours in detail about various types of sex acts but to talk about my body, my boundaries, my sex life is to tap too deeply into shame I can't make sense of.



We lay there curled up together and the next thing I remember he's on top of me. He's not trying to touch me; he's just suspended there with his weight on his hands and arms. I feel him moving in, the beginning of a kiss. I'm caught up in the closeness I feel. It's like I can feel him spilling into me. I open myself up, let down the walls and allow the stillness of connection. I give back all that I know how and there we are suspended; my fear of action, his insecurities and the alcohol. He leans in a bit more and I smile. Then like being awoken from a trance, he shakes his head shifts his weight and tells me he's sorry. I feel disappointed, betrayed and relieved. He retreats, the beginning of all his steps backwards. One step forward two steps back, this is our relationship. He runs away and I get to hide. I don't have to deal with the mind numbing fear of my body, self and of sex. The silence is encouraged. My shame is nurtured and it grows. You don't want to know about the self-destruction. You run away and I'm relieved in my tears.

I finally work up the courage to write it all down. I start the conversation the best I can, write my truth and send him a letter. A month goes by and it's more of the same, silence. We hang out and he looks at his feet and never at me. I'm devastated at first but then I'm angry. And that's what I felt the night that he stayed. Our friends get up to leave and he sits waiting for them to walk out. It's thanksgiving break and my roommates are all out of town. We are on opposite sides of the large room and I sit perfectly still. I decide I'm going to make it hard, make him do something. I know what's happening the second we make eye contact and I can't help but soften a bit. We sit in silence until he finally works up the courage to speak. I don't remember all the words, those sounds replaced by the significance of it all. We move closer and closer, covering the space between us. Finally, we are sitting together on the couch. We kiss and it's like the movies, only now I can feel everything that's only a distant image on the screen.

All that silence is covered with everything I wanted him to say. Eventually, we kiss goodbye and I remember how much I like that I have to stand on my toes to reach his lips.

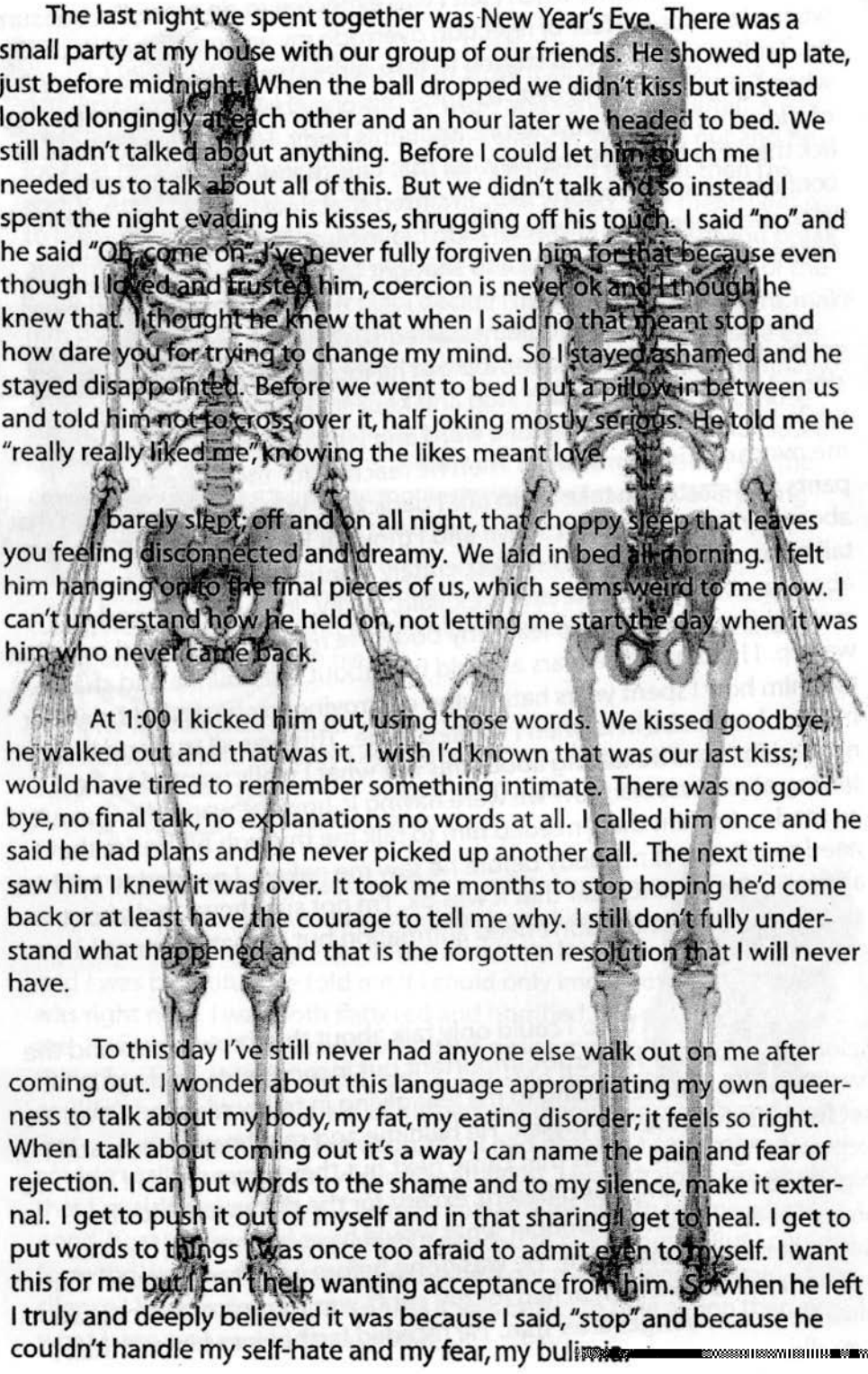
One month later and its winter break. We've barely seen each other since that first kiss. We only seemed to connect in the stillness of my basement or the quiet of this empty town. After all our small talk we start kissing. It's so beautiful and so scary.

I feel us flowing back and forth and it's amazing and new. The only other person who has touched my body like that was in love with my best friend. I was self-conscious about my long hair in his face and he said I was beautiful. He told me if I could only know how turned on he was right now. I was both flattered and horrified. His excitement scared me. I was afraid of his sexuality, that his desire meant he needed something from me, that he might take it. I trusted this person so much, yet couldn't help being so afraid of his perceived power, strength and masculinity. I just knew I wasn't enough, that I had nothing I could give. I couldn't talk about what I was really afraid of. I was afraid of sex, afraid that I couldn't please him. I wanted so badly for him to tell me what felt good, how to blow him. I wanted, I needed to talk about it. But I couldn't form the words, afraid to stop; afraid he'd get mad or worse. Afraid of the silence I keep going. I figured that it was better to take action then risk what I was sure would be rejection.

The time came when I felt I was expected to do more, I'm not sure I wanted to. But my fear of rejection overrode my voice with which to say no. I rolled him over and started to take off his pants. We both giggled when I got stuck on his belt. I'd done this once before with the guidance of a lover who knew how to talk about his body. He had directed me to lick that way and suck this way. All that talk, that direction gave me confidence, took away the fear. I wanted that now but I couldn't ask for it. With the other guy it was sex; I didn't love him. This time I wanted, desperately needed his love and thought that at any minute I'd lose it.

This fear kept me quiet. I started sucking but my apprehension colored everything. I tried to stop but he looked at me disappointed and sighed. I told him I wouldn't stop and kept sucking out of fear. After a while he stopped me without a word and I felt utterly defeated. He rolled me over and kissed my neck. Then he reached for the button on my pants and started to take them off. I panicked. What about my fat? What about my hair? I wouldn't shave and I thought he'd expect it. We hadn't talked about it and again I so desperately wanted to. I wanted to talk about my body before he saw it, explain, justify. Instead I stopped moving, frozen, starting to leave my body. He noticed and asked me what was up. I held back the tears as I told him about the bulimia and shame. I told him how I spent years hating and destroying my body and how that made it hard to be in it when I wanted to be. This was all true and I needed for us to be talking about this but what I really wanted to be talking about was sex; how we were having it, how we wanted to have it. I wanted to tell him that I needed him to talk me through his desire that I need to talk about my body before he saw me naked. I needed to tell him about my hair and to hear that it was ok. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I know now that I don't need affirmation but at that moment I did.

I couldn't say all that. I could only talk about the throwing up and the self-hate. It was my half-truth, important but incomplete. And again he was silent; his silence leading to my fear giving in to my silence. A trap we set for ourselves, I set for myself. He held me and said he was sorry and I kept waiting for the words that came next but they never did. He left that night and everything was different, except for the distance which had always been the same. I wonder what would have happened if he had just kept running that night. He was gone before he left my house. That moment just before he reached for my pants was the last moment I saw him. He was a stranger after that. He receded farther into himself than I ever did.



The last night we spent together was New Year's Eve. There was a small party at my house with our group of our friends. He showed up late, just before midnight. When the ball dropped we didn't kiss but instead looked longingly at each other and an hour later we headed to bed. We still hadn't talked about anything. Before I could let him touch me I needed us to talk about all of this. But we didn't talk and so instead I spent the night evading his kisses, shrugging off his touch. I said "no" and he said "Oh, come on." I've never fully forgiven him for that because even though I loved and trusted him, coercion is never ok and I thought he knew that. I thought he knew that when I said no that meant stop and how dare you for trying to change my mind. So I stayed ashamed and he stayed disappointed. Before we went to bed I put a pillow in between us and told him not to cross over it, half joking mostly serious. He told me he "really really liked me," knowing the likes meant love.

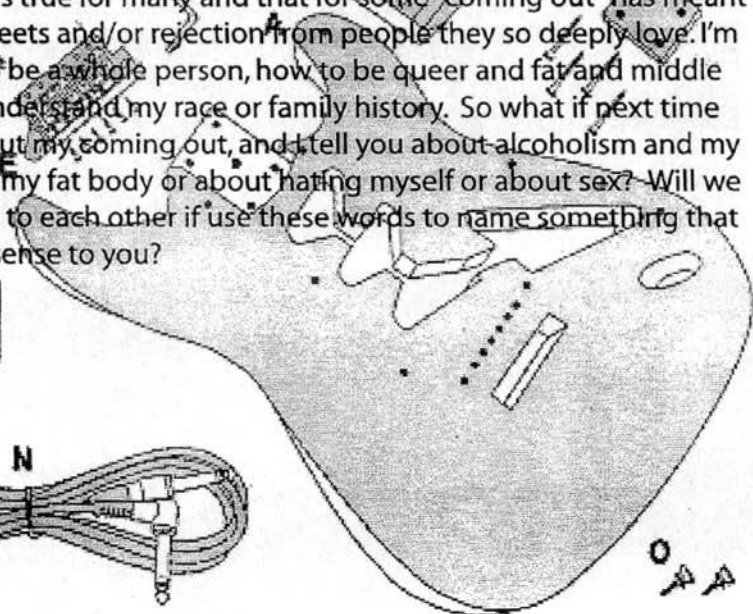
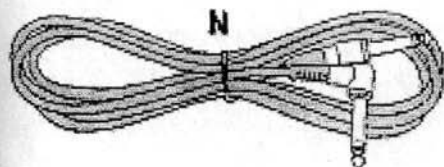
I barely slept; off and on all night, that choppy sleep that leaves you feeling disconnected and dreamy. We laid in bed all morning. I felt him hanging on to the final pieces of us, which seems weird to me now. I can't understand how he held on, not letting me start the day when it was him who never came back.

At 1:00 I kicked him out, using those words. We kissed goodbye, he walked out and that was it. I wish I'd known that was our last kiss; I would have tried to remember something intimate. There was no good-bye, no final talk, no explanations no words at all. I called him once and he said he had plans and he never picked up another call. The next time I saw him I knew it was over. It took me months to stop hoping he'd come back or at least have the courage to tell me why. I still don't fully understand what happened and that is the forgotten resolution that I will never have.

To this day I've still never had anyone else walk out on me after coming out. I wonder about this language appropriating my own queerness to talk about my body, my fat, my eating disorder; it feels so right. When I talk about coming out it's a way I can name the pain and fear of rejection. I can put words to the shame and to my silence, make it external. I get to push it out of myself and in that sharing I get to heal. I get to put words to things I was once too afraid to admit even to myself. I want this for me but I can't help wanting acceptance from him. So when he left I truly and deeply believed it was because I said, "stop" and because he couldn't handle my self-hate and my fear, my bulimia.

I've written songs, I've cried, I've talked and talked although rarely to him. I've written poems and unsent letters. I've cried. The answers stay jumbled up in so many pieces and I hope as I try to get them out of myself that they will start to reconnect. I search for explanations, I try to unpack the layers and I get lost. I have to take this one piece at a time. I can only come from where I am. That means learning to tell my truth in the moment and not pretending I know everything. I know I'll read this later and feel embarrassed, how simple it seems. For now they feel like revelations, and they've taken me years. I don't want to discount the importance of that. I'm learning to love myself more and I want to share with you how. Tell me how you're learning to love yourself.

I'm coming out all the time and while I hate the credibility that gets tied with coming out I love the freedom. I've always seen coming out as almost childish and maybe that's ok because when it comes to sex and my body I feel like a child. In disrupting a queer narrative that sets coming out stories as a marker you must pass into queerness, I've tried to challenge the ways that "coming out" can sometimes reinforce narratives of sameness. When you ask about my coming out story I know you're asking about my queerness and I'll tell you I wasn't born this way and that I think we sometimes tell coming out stories as a way to police our boundaries. I'm supposed to tell you a narrative of how I've "always been queer" and how hard it was but that I've come to accept it now. Then you see that I am like you, that we are the same and I'm allowed access to some secret society that may not have even wanted me. I respect and honor that this is true for many and that for some "coming out" has meant living on the streets and/or rejection from people they so deeply love. I'm learning how to be a whole person, how to be queer and fat and middle class and not understand my race or family history. So what if next time you ask me about my coming out, and I tell you about alcoholism and my family or about my fat body or about hating myself or about sex? Will we still make sense to each other if use these words to name something that may not make sense to you?





When it's you and me alone together at night,
there's more fear than liberation.

Racist Queers Are Everywhere

I've been writing a lot about being a fat queer and that has been really important to me. I'm trying to figure out how to be a whole person. Because I'm queer but I'm also fat and middle class and Latina and white. I need my communities to be multi-issue. I need a queer community that is addressing sexism, ableism, racism, fat phobia, classism, ageism, trans phobia and all oppression at the same time.



At Camptrans 2004 I left feeling the best about my body I ever have. I spent the week listening to fat queers talk about fat phobia and listening to really smart folks talk about femme phobia. It felt scary and intimidating but also really exciting. With all the talk I do about multi-issue communities this was one of the only places I've actually felt this in place. I felt like a whole person, I could be so many things at once.

I spent a lot of time at Camptrans crying. All of my buttons were pushed. I could hear all of these things coming out of my mouth that felt so young. And maybe that's ok, I'm trying to remove value judgments from that. One of my fondest memories is of walking through the woods with Sarah. We went on this long walk and I just cried. I talked about how triggered I felt around eating disorder and body stuff. I talked about how hard it is for me to have crushes, and about sex. It was healing and amazing. As we drove away from Camptrans, I felt whole, I loved myself. This was new for me- empowering.

Except that I wasn't a whole person. How can I be a whole person and be in this white, racist space? This is the contradiction that leaves me torn inside. There were all of these panels, mostly around identities. There was a multiracial panel. I went and it was amazing and scary. Mostly I just wanted to cry. I felt uncomfortable and acknowledged both at the same time. I talked a little about my grandpa, except that's all I seem to do when it comes to race. I talk about others, my family because I can't seem to talk about myself. I don't know how people read my racial identity. I know that a lot of people read me as white. Some people read me a person of color. It depends on context. Sometimes in white spaces I get scooped up as a person of color; white folks, eager to have another number to add to their tally. Except that in these same spaces some folks of color, usually other Latino folks are also naming me as one of the fold.

My whiteness doesn't get named like the whiteness that is all around us. There are things I am clear about. There are SO many things that I don't have to deal with in the world. My white skin privilege means that the police aren't regularly pulling me over (even though I'm such a speed demon), that people don't yell racial slurs at me as I walk down these Boulder streets, people don't ask me to speak for my race, and thousands of other things. It means I can feel mostly safe in white spaces. It means I don't have to prepare myself to go to camptrains in that same way because I hang around white queer folks most of the time. I struggle with talking about my race, not knowing how to name it, fearing, knowing that not naming my whiteness gives way to the racism, eating away at everything. I don't want to be that person that is claiming some long discarded relative as a way not to name my privilege.



I am struggling with the shame of my family, the internalized racism. Although my mom sometimes passes she is generally read as Latina. You're supposed to look like your family and I do. It's the complications of race that means I'm recognizable as my mother's daughter, in fact we're told how much we look alike all the time, while she is read as a person of color and I generally am not. Where is that line and how did we cross it? If race is a biological fallacy then the explanation of genetics, of halving the halves doesn't feel like an answer.

There are the stories of my family and their empowerment and shame. I don't speak Spanish because my Grandpa Perez hated himself, his brown skin, and his race so much that he rejected it at every turn. He hated his family and that was just as much about alcoholism as about race. When he went into the military he changed his name from Manuel to Ray and stopped speaking Spanish. My grandpa was an active alcoholic most of his life, he was an abusive father and my mother is pretty open about that.



My mom grew up in a house with continual yelling and dysfunction. She recently told me a story about my grandpa Perez yelling at my Uncle Kevin, his oldest child and only son. My Uncle Kevin used to take a lot of baths and my grandpa would yell at him and ask if he was ashamed, if he was trying to wash the color off. This feels so much about the complications of shame; internalized racism and pride weaved throughout my history. While my grandpa was trying to cast off his brownness, he was also enraged by what he thought were my Uncle's attempts to "wash off his color". I'm sure this was in part about gender, his only son is supposed to carry on some legacy, the Perez name, proud and strong.

And now I want to tell you everything. I want to figure this out. Negotiating race in my life could be a zine in itself and I need to be naming this more and more. Because I know that not naming my race means playing into racism that's eating everything.

I try to love the Latina in my life, try to address the internalized racism of my family, the shame and I



want acknowledgement, I want to be able to talk about my race, to name it. I get lost in all these things, in my miss-education. This hovering cloud, other people seeing my shame, a shame that I want to acknowledge but also I want to hide away from. That if I don't name my history and race I'm assumed to be white and then I'm playing into the "it's so great to be white" club and perpetuating all of that shit. Because so many people in my family have done this, tried to pass denied their race, our history. I don't want to continue this but I don't know how to flush out the history of my family, the lessons I've learned from them about race.

My family can't talk about this, the more I push the better it gets. My mom has been able to talk about racism in her life, about the slurs and tons of other things she doesn't really have the language to name. I don't feel support from my family, not all the time. And it always seems to come back to my family. How am I using my family to make sense of my race and how can I make sense of my race without my family?

I want answers but more than that I want to talk about it. I keep trying to find those answers and acknowledgement outside of myself and I know better than to expect that answers are going to come from someone else. But I keep hoping that someone else has figured this out and that they can give me some formula to follow. They can tell me that it's all ok and that I can be multiracial, that I can use that language to name myself while working to dismantle larger systems of racism, addressing racism that lives between my friends and I, the racism that I perpetuate.

I'm screwing up all the time and I'm trying to be ok with that. I'm trying to be patient and gentle with myself while I remember to be patient and gentle with others. This is my shit and it feels hard but I want to name it while also allowing it to exist in ambiguity.

So I'm preparing to go to camp trans 2005. I am struggling more and more with my willingness to be in that space. It feels so important, I want pieces of it so much. How can I make sense of the racism and denial? I was reading on strap-on about the whiteness of camp trans and I read a lot about accepting the whiteness of that space. That is not enough for me. I expect to be in a mutli-issue space that is challenging transphobia while addressing racism, evaluating how detrimental it is to separate them. I think about not going back until people are dealing with the whiteness of that space. I don't feel like my voice is enough.

And all I hear is my silenced voice aching for acceptance and acknowledgment. So again I'll make these choices and I'm trying to push past these boxes of either/or while not justifying or offering excuses for racist bullshit.

Fat is beautiful and I wish I fully believed that. I don't think my fat is beautiful. Self hate layers on lessons of imperfection. I'm so hungry for other fat queers in my life. When I find them all I can do is cry. I want to be folded up. I want to cry in their arms and hear them tell me I'm beautiful. I want to recover in that acceptance. I don't feel the same shame in those arms. I feel strong and I feel cared for. I feel beautiful.



After camp trans I was talking with E (a fat femme) and we talked about how much we love fat folks on bikes. We talked about forming a fat queer bike bargade. I felt solidarity and I felt visible. I felt acknowledged. So often I feel invisible. That moment of recognition filled this 12 year old part of me that cries about the stretch marks on my stomach. Thank you.

Out Thinking Myself

I didn't used to be like this. I never had panic attacks. Trauma lives in your body and I'm learning that more and more. I need to address stuff in the moment, now, as soon as possible because it doesn't disappear. It comes back and multiplies until I no longer understand myself. I feel like I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff back and forth. I feel it in my chest, at my center, shaking everything. I've been able to track all of this backwards, hours of therapy just to understand that pain lives in my body and manifests itself in everything.

It seems too simple to track all of this back to one experience but I'm starting there and trying to get that this is part of a journey that I'm figuring out. I'll start by trying to understand it, although I know that understanding it doesn't actually stop it. There are some things in my life that just by understanding how they work I can address whatever button that pushes for me. More and more I understand why I feel like this but the understanding hasn't stopped the insomnia or the endless reel of obsessive thoughts. Part of me truly believes that I can think myself out of anything, even my body.

I loved those late night Amsterdam bike rides. Those memories live in my arms, in my legs, fingers and toes and I'm so grateful for that. It was 10:00 pm. As I try to fit the pieces back together the details never come. Between the fear and exhilaration there are gaps. When I replay this in my mind there are times when I skip ahead not knowing what exists between the memories.

I was almost home when I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I've spent years learning to trust my intuition. Everything inside of me said that I was not safe. I'm so grateful for the pieces of me that knew what to do in this moment, for the part of me that clicked into action that was calm, collected and cool. I don't really remember feeling fear, at least not at first. I remember feeling sharp and calculating every move. I biked past this man and as we passed each other I knew he was a threat. I don't know what triggered him, why I knew that he wanted to harm me. The previous evening I had interrupted a man stealing a bike and I wonder if this is the same person coming back for his revenge.

And it's part of living as queer in the world that leaves me continually questioning if this moment was triggered by my queerness. There were no slurs, no "fag" or "dyke" only silence. And maybe it was about gender, a woman on her own. I don't know where to draw those lines, if I can draw those lines. I wonder about opportunity and intent and in the end it doesn't really matter because I know what it felt like. I know that when everything inside of me screams danger, I should trust that. So I don't need proof even though part of me wants to justify and prove to you that this trauma that still lives within me really is justified. I just need for you to trust that this moment has changed so much for me, that I experience it as trauma, a trigger that has meant sleepless nights and fear of strangers. It has meant that sometimes when I'm in a group of people the sound of my own heartbeat takes over everything and I feel like an injured animal that if startled could attack at any moment.

I see my apartment building ahead, wondering if I am safe. Instead of parking my bike in the racks in front of my building, I bike past and to the other side of the street. I double back and see that this man has turned around and is coming in my direction. He's not running but intently walking my way. I pretend not to watch him, trying to deescalate. If I mind my own business maybe he'll leave me alone. He looks at me and pushes past the broken lock on the door to my building. Glass walls insulate the lobby, a single light illuminating the small space. He stands at the bottom of the stairs and looks at me. These stairs are my safety; one flight, two doors and I am home.

I don't recognize him. How does he know where I live? Does he know where I live? Has he been watching me? He is waiting for me and I feel like prey. He is stalking me. His cold calculated actions scare me the most. It is like he is trying to lure me off of my bike, my escape. I wonder if I can out calculate him. Does he know who he is messing with? I get angry. How dare he stand in my way, no one stands in my way. I briefly contemplate pushing past him. It's only one flight of stairs and I know my host mom is home because I can see that the light is on. I wonder how long it would take someone to come if I started screaming, thirty seconds, a minute? Is this long enough for him to do any "real" harm (the harm was already done)? What kind of harm does he want to do? Sexual, does he just want to hurt me? Is this about gender stuff, my short hair, my queerness? I think through all of the options. Does he have a weapon? If I try to push past him would he pull out a weapon? There may not be enough time to scream if he's fast enough.

I decide to try and get my host mom's attention. Nestled between the two buildings is a phone booth. I slip into the booth and call my host mom. From where I'm standing I can hear the phone ringing but no one picks up. As the answering machine starts I see him leave the building and walk towards me. I rush to my bike, undo the locks and speed off. I never even look behind me but I know he is coming. Does he have a bike? Will he come after me? Where am I supposed to go? Who do I call? I don't know anyone here. My closest friend is at least 30 minutes by bike and it's late. I wouldn't even know how to get in contact with them. I have no support network here. I don't know who my allies are; I don't know what safety means.

I think about the police. The police are not structured to protect me. In the US I don't trust the police. I'm not feeling any more comforted in the Netherlands. The police are supposed to be better here but I'm holding in my head the picture of the police throwing my only Dutch friends out of their squat. I don't even know where the closest police station is. I just keep pedaling.


Finally, I run into several police officers dealing with a car accident. I wait until one of them is free and tell them about what has just happened. And as the words come out I start to cry. And again I'm mad, at them, at myself for crying. I don't want to be relying on these white men to protect me. I want to be self-sufficient and then I feel like a cliché, a little girl crying to these men, asking for protection. The tears come from relief, from my body releasing the fear of that moment. Two male police officers follow me back, me on my bike, them in a car behind me. I'm scanning, watching. We pull up in front of my building and of course we see nothing.

Part of me wishes he was still there so that at least there was someone outside of myself to bare witness to this experience. I walk into my apartment and there is my host mom and sister. I tell them what happened and they understand, affirm my fear, say, "That must have been so scary". And I appreciate these women who get it and that they're not questioning me. I call my mom and all I can do is cry. It takes me a little while to even explain what has happened. She calls me baby and tells me that she loves me and is happy that I'm safe. I spend the rest of the evening in my room. I write in the moment, process my fear and in a couple of hours I'm ready to sleep. And I thought I was doing ok. I was honoring the fear, listening to it. But then I wanted to be done. I wanted that to be it.

Everything grew from there. I'm not sure exactly how I got here. This experience doesn't live in isolation. Amsterdam was hard for me. It really kicked my ass. And now a year and a half later I'm just starting to make sense of everything, I'm just starting to feel ok again. I spent the four months after I came back from Amsterdam crying. I cried in public, I cried in my room, I cried in class, I cried to my therapist and I cried alone. I was barely functioning and I didn't even realize it until way too late. I didn't get that the way I was feeling was probably connected. It was like I didn't even know myself. I had all these ways of being that I didn't recognize. I had this image of who I was but somewhere along the way that shifted and I was different but still functioning like I was that old person.

This feels so new and I didn't grow up learning how to manage this. And that's something I want to be conscious about. I haven't been dealing with this my entire life and I don't want to be appropriating language around mental health stuff when it's not appropriate. I use the term crazy in really intentional ways and I want you to know that. I see so much appropriation of language around mental health and I don't want to be apart of that. I'm trying to find language to talk about my experiences without stepping on other folks.

I wonder if the panic attacks will ever go away or if they've become apart of how I live in the world. I was talking to a friend the other day and I was telling her this story and she said that our experiences can't make us crazy but that they can trigger stuff inside of us. And I'm not sure what I think about that, if this is something that lives inside of me and was just triggered by the experiences of my life. Either way I'm learning how to cope. I'm re-learning what safety means. I'm learning how to take care of myself. I'm learning that when I eat regularly, sleep and breath I can better manage that tight feeling in my chest. I'm learning that trauma lives within my body and I can't undo that but I can learn how to manage it and live each day as it's own.



REALLY, I
WON'T HURT
YOU...

All the First...

It was my first time in Berlin, the first time I'd ever been completely naked in front of anyone, the first time I'd stood up and said no. That seems weird to think about now. I'm at a European spa and surrounded by friends and strangers.

I'm hiding inside myself, consumed by my own naked body. I'm trying to figure out how to relate like this. And there is a stranger, a figure that lives more in my memory now than he ever did in reality.

I feel his presence before I ever see him. When I turn around I see a man watching me in that way that makes everything inside me shutter. I had come with friends but I look around only to see strangers. I watch as he approaches me, reaches out and tries to touch my chest. I stand still, heart beating fast. I let the words, "No," escapes my lips. I look him in the eyes as he responds to me in German. Before another moment passes I feel my legs move and I realize that I am walking away. He is following in my wake. I see a group of people I know and I duck into the Sauna with them. I start to breath into release as I tell Sarah about what has just happened. We all fall quiet and together we sit melting away.

Fifteen minutes later the heat becomes too much. As I stand up I feel the panic building up inside me. I feel the vulnerability of my exposed flesh and the newness of the lost safety, my shield left in a pile at the bottom of the locker room floor. I feel exhilaration and fear.

And again, there is this man, only water separating us. I move away until finally, he backs me into a corner. Sarah sees this and maneuvers so that she is standing behind me. She supports me in all the ways I could have ever wanted. She stands behind me letting her presence be known and empowering me to speak for myself, supporting me in using my own voice. I feel protected and safe. I look him directly in the eyes and say, "NO! You do not have permission to touch me in any way. Leave me alone." There is more German as he steps into me. I stand my ground and repeat my warning. All three of us stand there for a moment, silent and still. I stood there in the water naked and I felt strong. My heart was beating fast but the support of my friend gave me strength I didn't know I had.

I took a deep breath and together Sarah and I walked past him. I was visibly shaken but proud. Sarah asks me what I need and together we sit and I decide to go put on my clothes and meet up with friends in another part of the building.

It is the hate of my own body and the fear of this exact moment that has in part left me piling clothes on layer by layer. I know it's more complicated than that. Clothes do not protect me and I know that. Hiding is not the answer, hiding is not my answer. I'm encompassed by the belief that my fat desexualizes me. I use it as a shield. I feel safety when men hate my body. I hate this. I can't make sense of non-trans men in my life. I don't know how to reckon that with queer and trans politics. I don't know how to reconceptualize masculinity when pieces of me are so afraid of men.

My breasts and my fat; I have large breasts and this is all wrapped within my fat. My fat feels safe and even as I'm relearning how to read my body I'm trying to understand how others view me. While my fat is desexualized my breast are marked as inherently sexual, the focus of a lot of attention from straight (and some queer) men. Growing up, men focused a lot of attention on my breasts. When my body was recognized, acknowledged the focus was almost always my chest. I didn't know how to make sense of that when I was young. I hated my breast, I thought they made me look big, top heavy. I always wanted them to be smaller. If they were smaller maybe I'd look thinner. In high school I learned to love my chest, discovering that regardless of what anyone else thought my breasts were beautiful.

Within queer spaces my relationship to my breasts changed. I cut my hair in stages. A couple of years ago I had long hair, down to my waist. Nine months after True Spirit I had shaved my head. This changed so much. It changed how people saw me. All of a sudden I was read as queer in ways I never had been. This is so fucked and relates to issues of femme phobia and how boundaries are policed within queer communities. I want to be talking more about this.

After my hair was gone the way people were reading my gender presentation changed. More and more attention was being focused on my chest. When I was in Amsterdam I was working on a project about the accessibility of services to transgender and transsexual folks in the Netherlands. As I was talking about this project, interviewing folks I could tell that people were trying to read me, put together the pieces of my gender presentation to figure out pronouns and identities. They'd start with my hair, check out my clothes and eventually they'd look at my chest. Was I flat or round? Was I binding? They wanted this to tell them something about who I was. I was ok about the gender stuff, it brought out a lot of other things but mostly it brought everything back to my body.

When I started to bind all my old stuff came back. I started to believe that my fat meant I couldn't ever be genderqueer enough. I thought that to fuck with gender I needed to be thin and flat and have short hair. That's almost funny now, but not quite.

The more I started messing with gender the less attention I got from non-queer men. This is a blessing and a curse. So many of my relationships with men (trans and non-trans) have been so fundamentally important to me and I am not willing to give those up. At the same time so many of my interactions with men have been so hard and scaring and this goes from overbearing men in class to coercive sex. It feels gendered and that gets in my way so much.

I'm taking my fat queer body into public. I'm starting to perform. Actually, I'm talking about performing more than I'm actually doing it. My friend Andie and I are talking about doing fat girl burlesque together and that feels like lifetimes away from where I started. Two years ago I'd never been naked in front of anyone (at least not since I was a kid) and now I'm preparing to do Burlesque.

It's summer again and I'm finally wearing tank tops and not letting that consume my every thought. I don't have to spend this summer traumatized by the fear of my own body. I'm still afraid to let you see my stomach and that's why so much of my shared nakedness has been cloaked in darkness, wrapped between the sheets with a lover.

I've finally learned how to just be comfortably naked with myself and I guess I knew that I had to do that before I was ever going to be comfortable being naked with anyone else.

As I write about the violence I experience in the world I also want to write about the process of healing and re-learning. I need to tell you that as I've spent years learning to love myself I take as many steps backwards as I do forwards.

My definition of violence is really broad and it's taken me a while to realize that these experiences are violent. I've just recently started checking myself on the ways I minimize experiences of violence in my life. Part of that minimization is about normalizing violence. If I understood every slur yelled from a car or unwanted sexual advance as violence, that means a scarier world than I'm fully prepared to deal with. Except that minimizing that violence is also ignoring it, leaving it unnamed. I demand a safer world where no one should be expected to tolerate harassment and violence; where everyone is safe and any act of violence is taken seriously and addressed. I do this as I'm also trying to figure out how to cope with violence. I don't know how to both denormalize violence and still function in a world where violence is being perpetuated all around me, on strangers and loved ones.

I debated whether to include these two stories in here. I don't want to perpetuate fear. I don't want women to be afraid. I don't want queers to be afraid. I don't want to be afraid. Sometimes I think stories like this can perpetuate the myth of sexual assault as a strange man hiding in a dark corner and attacking. At the same time we live in a violent sexist world where women, queers and trans folks are disproportionately targeted for sexual violence. That is my reality; this is a scary world for marginalized folks. I think about all the things that insulate me, my class privilege my white skin privilege, my suburban up bringing.

Sometimes I wonder if my body insulates me. I can feel all the things that aren't right with that, like if I was thin that means men would desire me more. But I'm skeptical of a view of sexual assault that's only about bodies or sex instead of power. I've been thinking a lot about my body, my fat body and how it's viewed and interpreted in relationship to power. Fat is viewed as access. My body literally takes up space, is that seen as power? Sometimes I think so. I am so tired of being ashamed of my

body. I'm tired of pretending I'm less. I feel numbed to the space that I take in the world. The other day my friend jumped into my arms and trusted that I could hold him. This seems dependent on my size, it's equated with strength yet understood as unhealthy. Like brute force associated with being stupid. Like I can't be large and smart or well spoken. I have to be out of control. Which also gets linked to my activism. Within my university (and outside of it) I get shut down as too radical. I'm often talked down to and seen as illogical. This is not a one-dimensional issue. But what the shame around my body has not allowed me to do is understand how my fat is viewed as access and it's connection to me being painted as out of control.

My fat does insulate me, from my own sexuality and this is why I wonder about how it insulates me from the fear of sexual assault. I know this is all a construction because the fear of saying no to someone I love still grips me and I can be twice their size and lay their felling helpless. But it's that stranger assault, that fear that sits in the back of my brain, that won't go away. Those lessons pounded into me are so powerful so even when I know how they work and why they're faulty I can't fully escape them.



There are so many people that love and support me. As I graduate from college my support networks are changing and I wonder what's holding me up. Sometimes I imagine my life as a series of balls all up in the air. I'm balancing all of them in (almost) perfect harmony and if I let one drop for even a moment, they will all come crashing down. But every time I feel like falling there's a network of love and support there to catch me. And this is always so amazing to me because I never see it. Sometimes I catch glimpses of the community I'm working so hard to build but mostly it feels like an abstraction, something I've created in my head. Until those moments, when I don't know where to turn and I think everything is falling in on me. In those moments I experience the reality of the networks, friends, loved ones, family, there for everything, anything I could ever need.

I'm learning how to trust things I can't see or even name. I'm learning that it's not a balancing act, I don't have to do this by myself. So as I'm coping with violence I'm learning how to help others cope with violence. I'm learning that as a community, we're building each other up and that even as I may sound idealistic I'm being lifted by love I can't even see.



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